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THE DEMOCRATIC OPPORTUNITY

BY THOMAS NELSON PAGE

IN view of the new conditions that appear to be confronting us—new seas of peril that surround us and talk of new methods of meeting these perils that din in our ears—it would seem clear to any student of public affairs that never in our time has there been a greater need for sane and unselfish thinking, or when a greater opportunity was presented a political party to render a vast service to the American people and, consequently, to the world than is now offered the Democratic party.

A comparison of the last two elections must prove to any clear-minded man that there is a great body of sound conservatism in the country which refuses to be bound to the chariot wheel of any political party—that there are hundreds of thousands of independent thinkers and voters in the land—enough to decide at any time any question of sufficient gravity to arouse their interest. This conservative element is divided between the parties. That portion in the Democratic party withstood all the delusions on the silver question and decided the issue, and now a similar element in the Republican party has broken through the trammels of custom and has rebuked the leaders of that party for their sacrifice of the people to “the interests.”

Sundry and diverse causes are assigned for this change and range all the way from the “off-year” idea and the tidal change of “the floating vote” to the recognition of the fact that “Speaker Cannon was too heavy a load to carry,” while tingeing them all was the resentment over the high cost of living, the factional dissensions in the Republican party, and the grave and far-reaching distrust caused by the surprising utterances of Mr. Roosevelt.

It is probable that all of these causes contributed to the result, but no one of them was the chief and final cause.

This cause would appear to lie deeper and to be founded in the conviction on the part of the people that the Republican party had been sold by its leaders in State after State for a mess of pottage and had come to be the creature of a privileged class and to stand for special privileges for that class, while the declared Democratic principle was the ending of all privilege and the securing of equal rights to all the people in the legislation enacted in their name.

What caused the change does not appear to have been so much confidence in the Democratic party as a feeling of betrayal at the hands of the Republican party. This feeling has been long in taking root—so long that one who recalls the vast corruption funds contributed by the privileged and protected classes and their attendant lobbies and able champions in high places wonders at the blindness that permitted it to go on. But in the end the root has struck deep and we have the first fruit: the unmistakable intention of the people of the country to give the Democratic party an opportunity to redeem its pledges and to make good its promises.

The Republican party has had many opportunities. It has been for a generation, politically speaking, nearly omnipotent. Enthroned on the Olympus of public patronage and private privilege, like Jove, it created the atmosphere in which it cast its thunderbolts.

Following the example set him by a Democratic statesman in continuing to recognize the high principle that “public office is a public trust”; to enforce Civil Service Reform and to declare for the rights of the people as against privilege, Mr. Roosevelt struck away one prop which the Republican party had rested on.

One, however, he left, and it was the greatest of all. “The cohesive power of public plunder” was for the most part sheared away through the enlargement of Civil Service Reform, though the machinery by which it had been kept in existence remained; and the standard of official requirement generally was vastly raised, though in certain States the bosses were left well-nigh as supreme as before. A boss substantially supreme, with the aid of a great corporation, continued to boss Pennsylvania and hold it as a pocket borough; another boss continued to boss New York; and so it was elsewhere, only not to the same extent. But the chief agency he left untouched. The tariff itself, with its

protection for a privileged class, created the vastest corruption fund that ever existed. Among all Mr. Roosevelt's declarations against privilege—and on this subject his declarations were wholly democratic—he was singularly silent on the enormity of the tariff—the foundation of privilege, for even the head of the sugar trust admitted that the tariff was the nursing mother of the trusts. The Philistines were too strong for Samson, and he who attacked the lion in his covert and fought a righteous battle against the captains of the Old Guard held his peace on this most important subject in the presence of the oppressors of the people. At the Saratoga convention he surrendered to the forces of privilege and the tariff was endorsed again by its “friends.” Happily, his aid in the great struggle then pending was not needed. The people were seeing light.

When the publication of campaign contributions was decided on the Republican party was really doomed, for it had abandoned its old claim to be founded on a moral principle and was frankly basing its claim to usefulness as a party solely on the protective principle—the protection of the privileged class.

Accordingly, when, though only after much opposition, the law was put into effect, requiring the publication of all large campaign contributions, the chief means by which the power of this subsidized party had been continued fell to the ground. Samson had overthrown the pillars and the structure could not stand. The Democratic party may certainly claim the title to this victory. Like the landing of Garibaldi's craft on the Calabrian shore, it was a small boat, but it carried a great fortune.

Nothing has been more remarkable in the political history of the last two administrations than the easy and wise adaptability with which the titular chiefs of the Republican party have adopted certain Democratic principles and utilized them, forcing them on their party leaders. They have, indeed, ploughed with the Democratic heifer, for nearly every sound policy which Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Taft have advocated were those for which the Democracy have been so long contending. One might, for example, instance the control of the illegal monopolies called trusts; the effort to destroy the pernicious system of rebating by which the vampire trusts, with the aid of the great traffic lines, sucked the life blood of their competitors

and charged them a toll for the operation; the attempt, though it was somewhat tardily made, to give a chance for the freer expression of the people's will, through the law requiring publication of campaign contributions before election, without the travesty of deferring such publication until after election. And, finally, the yet tardier adoption of the principle for which a distinguished, though unsuccessful, candidate for the Presidency on the Democratic ticket contended in his canvass—the economical administration of the Government.

It is because of their adoption and earnest advocacy of these principles of the Democracy that I have always maintained that those two distinguished gentlemen were much in advance of the party at whose head they found themselves. My personal judgment is that, however much they may have differed, they both have sincerely sought the welfare of the whole people and have desired to execute the office of President with an eye single to the public good. If they have failed in any particulars, it has been because they were "hampered" not by the Senate alone, as one of them is credited with having asserted in another connection, but by the party to which they belonged, which, with its powerful organization, stood for class legislation under whatsoever plausible form. But neither Mr. Roosevelt nor Mr. Taft has been strong enough to resist the organization which placed them in power.

Nor would it be proper for a moment to characterize as dishonest the great body of the members of that party. The multitude of this party, as of the other party, are without doubt honest and patriotic men—they believe in the tariff as religiously as they believe in any other tenet in which they have been reared. They vote, so to speak, by inheritance and are the innocent instruments of oppression and privilege. Yet, so oppressive had this class legislation grown that in the last national convention of the delegates of that national party which has stood for it with a consistency worthy of a better cause—a revolt was threatened by so considerable an element of their own supporters that they were forced to reckon with them. Throughout the West and Northwest—the hotbed of Republicanism while it had a moral national issue—the murmuring grew louder and louder, until it became necessary to appease these malcontents. An express promise was made to revise the law under

which its most universal, far-reaching and insidious form of oppression was maintained. But they declared that it must be revised "in the house of its friends." As well talk of revising the laws of Piracy in the cabin of Lafitte or Blackbeard.

They revised it in the house of its friends—with what result the 8th of November showed.

At first they actually began to discuss whether "revision" necessarily meant downward. It may be frankly admitted that it does not—certainly not in the history of the Republican party—but used in the sense in which it was used by that party and every member thereof at this time, it meant this alone; and this the people knew. It was a bold and flagrant betrayal of the trust reposed in them, and, what is more, it was a stupid one. For it was an attempt to fool the people. Deceived by them, the people rebelled, and, finding that they had been betrayed by one party, they turned to the other.

Next, the Republican leaders made a concerted attempt to show that the measure adopted was a fulfilment of their pledge—that they had revised the tariff downward. This in face of the fact that steamships rushing across the ocean had telegraphed imploring that the custom-houses be kept open so that they might land their cargoes before the new tariff law went into effect and that prices promptly soared upward. They displayed with gravity the figures showing the great number of articles on which they had lowered the duties from dried acorns and fish-bones to orange-peel and raw hides. Against this was the singular fact that the struck balance of the duties levied under the Payne bill was actually greater than under the Dingley bill, but the true answer to their argument was the upsoaring of prices of everything save brains and brawn, labor and service. From the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there was no article of apparel that was not dearer—from the nipple on the baby's milk-bottle to the spade that dug the old man's grave there was not one object in all the industrial round of life that did not rise in cost to the consumer, while none or very little of the increase went into the hands of the laborers who produced it. The huge increase was divided between the sagacious persons who combined in illegal trusts and secured the protection of their manufactures by the tariff and the shrewd middlemen who agreed with less formalities

not to undersell each other. Only the consumers suffered—the men who live on fixed salaries or daily wages representing, say, seventy million of our people. A distinguished Senator from the State at whose behest raw hides had been favored was at equal pains to show that the tariff had nothing to do with the rise of prices, as witness the rise in shoes, and that the triumph of the Democracy would reinstate the South in power. The people, however, knew better; they knew how “the illegal combines” had come into power, and they knew where they found their support. They knew that the rise in leather could no more be due to free hides than a rise of dust could be due to rain.

The revolt spread. So urgent became the need of aid that the highest authority in the land—the honored and broad-minded President himself—was brought out to strike his hand over the place and speak the word that should heal the sore—with what result! He expressed his opinion that the Payne-Aldrich Tariff Bill, which he had signed to preserve the solidarity of the Republican party, was the best tariff law ever adopted by the Republican party. This was possibly not very high praise. The answer of the people indicated that the solidarity of the Republican party was no longer a fetich to conjure with. The solidarity of the Republican party meant now class legislation and appalling and oppressive prices. The gentleman nominated on the Saratoga platform was defeated; the able representative for whom the President spoke at Winona has been left at home; Mr. Aldrich, the very Apostle of Protection, is in face of the handwriting on the wall retiring from public life; Mr. Payne who fathered the tariff bill has had a fight for his political existence, and Mr. Lodge is discovering that appeals to sectional feeling no longer take the place of economic facts in the minds of the people.

In this novel state of the case an attempt was made to follow the ancient Hebrew custom and bind the sins of the party on a scapegoat. For this sacrifice a person was selected whose position was commanding enough to attract attention—a firstling of the flock, so to speak. Mr. Cannon was frank, able, bold, resolute, in his declarations against tariff revision. He stood for the utmost that the most stern and unbending high protectionists stood for, and he stood boldly—almost truculently—for what others stood for in secret and under cover of his courage. With his majority

well organized at his back he was able to be a dictator in the matter of legislation; and he was a dictator. Representative Government so far as the House of Representatives was concerned was what he and the Committee on Rules pleased to allow. It was only when the people changed that a section of his organization changed. It was change or stay at home and they made their choice promptly. Then finding the bold and scornful Speaker in danger, they began gradually to withdraw from him, and as it gradually appeared more popular to do so they grew bolder—until at last even the most tardy grew bold enough to assail him. Even those who might be termed the Cordelias of his House are now declaring that they can no longer support him.

“Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Had challenged pity of them.”

But it is known by every one conversant with the facts that whatever cause the Democrats may have had to assail Mr. Cannon, what he declared was quite true—he could not have retained his power for a single hour except with the aid and endorsement of the organized Republican majority at his back, in which majority were, of course, included the members who deserted him in his hour of trial.

It has become the fashion to aid in the effort to bind the sins of Republican rule on Mr. Cannon's back. He is undoubtedly entitled to be laden with his full share of this burden, but he was only more bold and more honest than most of his former followers who now assail him. When he was most dictatorial they were most subservient; they surrendered to him the right of the people to be heard on the floor of the Congress, and it was only when the people revolted that they mustered up the courage to aid the Democracy in resistance to his methods. The cause of the trouble dates further back than Mr. Cannon's rise to power.

For years we have been led forward like the ass in the fable with a bundle of hay held in front of his nose. For years we have been assured that, under the protective principle, we were all most prosperous—that we were steeped in riches beyond the dream of avarice—that a door had been opened in the Orient through which our trade was extending into that vast market. In fact, we were so wealthy a few years ago that we had to increase our pension list and enter upon all sorts of wild and reckless extravagance to

exhaust our surplus. The suggestion of the Democrats to reduce duties and cut down expenditures was scoffed at. The country was lulled into an iridescent dream of greatness and power and wealth. We awoke to find our greatness mere bulk; our wealth mainly confined to a class swollen with ill-gotten plunder of the masses; our country hated by every other nation on the surface of the globe. We awoke to find traffic lines and trusts with watered stock and over-capitalization grinding the people between the upper and the nether millstone—to find our population habituated to habits of wild extravagance instead of economy and thrift, as their fathers had, been—and yet more unhappily to find them accustomed to the malign suggestion of the stretching of the Constitution by executive order and judge-made law instead of by constitutional methods. We awoke to find the expenses of the Government grown to a fabulous sum and the fact used boldly as an argument to maintain the enormous duties behind which Privilege is entrenched, and to find the people turning to socialism and other outworn or untried specifics for the cure of the trouble. Our forces in the Orient have extended, indeed, but in a way to cause us equal expense and anxiety, while at the same time we have so neglected and dealt with our American neighbors who are our natural allies that we have not only wasted in the past our opportunities for trade in that great market, but have substituted for the warm friendship which they once felt for us their bitter hostility.

One may go from New York to-day entirely around South America and never see the American flag afloat. He may, indeed, encircle the globe, as a friend of mine has recently done, and not see it three times, unless it be on a war-ship. Our merchant marine has disappeared from the ocean.

I am not arguing at this time and in this place against the principle of a strong navy. Indeed, if we are to maintain ourselves in the Orient, we must, so long as other nations continue their policy of increasing their navies, participate ourselves in the same folly, though I earnestly long for the time to come when nations shall be at peace and the principles of law, adjudged and enforced by international courts, shall take the place of the huge navies and armies that now overburden the world. Within the past month the House of Representatives, by a large vote, passed a bill which, it is stated, will add forty-five million dollars to our

pension roll. And the end is not yet. Truly, we are being fried in our own fat. I note that we pay more for pensions growing out of a war that ended forty-five years ago than Germany pays to maintain the greatest military establishment in the world; that as the shining ranks of those who saved the Union have thinned, the roll of the pensioners has steadily increased, and the deserter, the faker, and the perjurer have become the beneficiaries of that which the people intended as the tribute of their gratitude. I recall with sorrow that not long since a report was made by a commission which showed that of our vast annual expenses eighty-two and one-half per cent. were due to the effects of war, past or prospective, and but seventeen and one-half were caused by all the other burdens of Government.

When the people shall awaken fully to these facts the need will be only one of administration, for they themselves will provide that the principle be established.

And now the question arises: What will the Democratic party do with the chance thus offered them?

Mr. Lincoln is credited with the wise observation that the Democratic party always did the wrong thing at the right time. Have they learned anything since then in the school of Adversity? It remains to be seen. Will they, in the very outset of their progress, quarrel over "the loaves and fishes" or will the vision of the future lend them the self-restraint and wisdom which they so sorely need? Signs are not wanting even now that the first contest for an office of importance will split their forces and engender bad blood to a degree that may imperil their future success. The plan of elective committees is even now creating rivalries and enmities which threaten the integrity of the party. If the views of a disinterested friend might prevail, they had better follow the example of the early Church and select a leader by lot than enter on a contest which may disrupt them.

On this point, it goes without saying that no Speaker should be chosen who does not recognize the fundamental right of the people to have their legislation based on due deliberation and discussion.

In passing, it may not be impertinent to warn the Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives that no nostrum in the form of placing the Speakership in "Commission" through elective committees or enlarging the Committee on Rules will cure the canker which has been de-

stroying representative government in the national assembly. That evil which has grown so markedly of late that men have even given it a name, "Cannonism," must be arrested by the House itself, which should adopt a system of rules adequate to the situation and resilient enough to be ever responsive to the will of the majority; and then on the Speaker should devolve the responsibility of their due enforcement. It is an essential principle of every deliberative assembly that the majority should have the power to control its action and that there should be a presiding officer with authority to direct its procedure. This is absolutely essential in a national assembly in which only a fraction of the measures proposed can by any possibility be deliberated on. The responsibility for constructive work is on the majority and no deliberative body could proceed with any hope of usefulness without a recognition of these principles. To control its power of action would be to destroy itself and render its existence abortive—to enable obstruction to usurp the place of construction. The majority is responsible to the country. The Speaker should be responsive to the majority. Any diffusion of responsibility would simply make confusion worse confounded. One fact is plain. They must restore the lost principle of representative Government in the House of Representatives.* The people wish it. And this done, they must proceed promptly and honestly to carry out the pledges they have made the people and abolish privilege. They must boldly cut protection down to the lowest point allowable by our economic conditions and they must do it promptly. They were elected to do this fundamental thing. No galvanizing of dead issues will take its place.

This is not the first occasion on which the door of opportunity has been opened to the Democracy and they have shut it on themselves. Let them remember "the landslide" of 1892 and its consequences. The same thing may easily occur again. Titus is still before the gates. By 1912 the shattered and shaken forces of Privilege will have recovered

* A thoughtful suggestion was made during the last session of the Congress by a distinguished representative from Kentucky—Mr. Swager Sherley—as to a method by which a majority of the House could at any time bring about consideration of a measure in due and orderly manner without resorting to the revolutionary method of an attack on the Speaker and which should go far to prevent the effect of packing committees. See "Congressional Record," April 1st, 1910, Debate on H. R., 23311.

from their overthrow and the fight will have to be made over again. Only by uniting on the fundamental principles and making mutual concessions as to personal interests can the Democracy hope to win. If they falter the party is lost. The principles will some day be victorious, but the Democratic party will have lost the glory of the victory.

One difficulty with the Democracy has been that they have always had so many men ambitious to command and so few able to command. The situation recalls the story of the old planter in the South who undertook to offer remunerative work to all soldiers returning home from Appomattox and so posted a notice on his gate-posts. He soon found himself obliged to modify his notice and post, "No more Major-Generals wanted." The simple fact is that the people do not care a straw whether a gentleman from Missouri or a gentleman from Virginia or from New York shall preside over the House of their Representatives. What they do care for is that the deliberations of "that respectable body" shall be deliberative and neither tyrannical nor ineffective, and shall result in giving them legislation that shall be sane, sound, wise, constitutional, protective of their rights and considerate of their needs.

The Democracy has before it a clear, if difficult, mission—to establish the rights of the people according to the Constitution, and to make it plain that among these rights is the right to acquire and hold and use property in any manner not inconsistent with the rights of others and only so. If the rights of the people and this property right are conflicting, then is this latter no right, for the rights of the people are the supreme law. But why should the rights of the people be in conflict with any other right properly apprehended and defined? If there be a conflict, it must of necessity be that the definitions are wrong and what is termed a right is no right. It is conceivable that what A, B, or C or A, B, C and Co., Incorporated, may call and even deem their rights in and with certain property, may conflict seriously with the rights of the people; but if so we have a clearly defined and well-established method of ascertaining the fact. And surely there can be no conflict between the rights of the people and any real right to hold and use property which has been honorably and lawfully acquired. Such alleged property rights may, however, have been obtained in contravention of law—for example, through

the debauchery of the representatives of the people themselves, through disregard and betrayal of the recognized duties of trusteeship—and it makes no difference whether the privileged class be limited or extensive as to numbers. To illustrate again: if any class, whether small or large, any guild, any combination or federation or union, any calling or occupation, which by training, experience and organization finds itself able to assert a right to a special privilege of any kind, this right must give way to the rights of the people.

It is the high mission and duty of the Democratic party at this juncture to reconcile these apparently conflicting claims and to adjudge between them, guarding alike the rights of the people and of that element of the people who by wisdom, economy and thrift have honorably and lawfully been able to accumulate property and are properly exercising ownership thereof.

The Democracy must be at once both progressive and conservative. It must honestly fulfil its pledges. It must meet bravely the questions arising out of the new conditions of which we hear so much, and it must conserve those rights of the individual on which our security has been based in the past. Nor is this reconciliation as difficult as some would have us believe. We are, it is true, drifting into new seas; but we have a chart by which we may steer safely, however perilous the tides that swing and sway us and the rocks and reefs that appear in our course. Its name is the Constitution.

And it was drawn by a body of wise, experienced and patriotic men whose minds were set on one thing—Civil Liberty through the perpetuation of Republican institutions.

Moreover, we have not only a clear issue in the rights of the people against privilege, but for the first time in some years we have a choice of leaders, any one of whom will command respect and meet the most exacting standard as the representative of the national Democracy—for all are men of character, ability and devotion to the ideals of Democracy—all stand for Equal Rights for all and Privilege for none.

Not long since we were told by a distinguished citizen whose experience and former service gave him the right to the attention of the country that what we need is to awaken to the call of "the New Nationalism." He was possibly not as felicitous in his definition as he was clear in his

characterization. He has, indeed, been explaining from time to time since precisely what he did mean. For signs are not wanting that the people are content with the old Nationalism and have no mind to throw away that chart by which mainly they have steered in the past.

The student of Government knows that the aggression of the executive power, through its gradual aggrandizement, is the road by which mainly all republics come to their fall. The most serious peril to representative Government is the encroachment of its executive on the rights of its legislative branch, and such encroachment has usually to be regained by the red hand of Revolution. If, therefore, the people are wise they will insist that, whatever the exigency may appear to be, it shall be met in the orderly and legal way laid down by the Constitution itself. Any other way leads to revolution. Mr. Taft's best contribution to this country is his firm recognition of laws.

Should any grave situation really arise in which State powers are inadequate and national powers are without warrant, the means to meet it are laid down clearly in the Constitution. The people themselves, through their Representatives, are to declare whether such a case exists and how it shall be met—in the form of an amendment to the Constitution, deliberately and duly adopted, after full and free discussion.

In fine, one thing appears to be clear: that if the Democratic party is to secure the confidence of the people as the trustee of this Government, it can accomplish it in only one way: by standing forth as the champion of their rights to the limit of the Constitution and its due amendments—it cannot accomplish the object by mere excellence of organization, however necessary this may be; it must deserve their confidence—and this it can do only by espousing their cause. If it attempt to fling itself into the arms of a class, whether of capitalists or of laborists, it is lost. The party of the future is the party that shall stand for all the people and their rights under the law—for true Democracy and the Constitution.

THOMAS NELSON PAGE.